



EARLY MORNINGS IN THE SOFT LIGHT

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It was the day before Thanksgiving, and it was a downright chilly morning. Wispy clouds formed around us each time we spoke or exhaled. Heat was slowly building in my leather gloves from the hand warmers that had been activated twenty minutes prior. I was dumping 12-gauge 7½ shot shells into my bird vest pockets. Perfect for bobwhite quail. Rich was doing the same thing, but instead of shooting a hefty twelve gauge, he was filling his vest pockets with dainty little red 28-gauge cartridges. The sun had crested the horizon, illuminating the land with a soft light. Beams of muted rays bounced off the polished receiver of my Ruger Red Label shotgun and caused a sunburst that made me look away when it hit my eyes.

Rich's little tricolored French Brittany, Stormy, ran circles around the truck. The dog acted like someone had just put fresh batteries in her. It was apparent from Stormy's enthusiasm that she was ready to find birds. She abruptly stopped and curiously put her nose up into the air, with what appears to be a constant comical, sly grin on her face. She quickly moved on.

A series of rapid clicks could be heard in the background and pulled my attention away. My youngest daughter Elicia, an aspiring sports photographer, had accompanied us and was already moving around taking pictures. She wanted to capture some shots for her portfolio. Rich and I each turned on our radios and were greeted with a loud squelch.

We walked out onto the edge of a well-worn path that led to a weedy field. My hands weren't warming up as fast as I wanted them to, and I brought my left hand up and breathed warm air into the leather glove. Rich was pointing across the field along the edge of some thickets and cedars where he had found two coveys before. The plan was for Rich to walk just inside the tree line, and I would stroll through the field, while Stormy did her job weaving in and out in front of us. I instructed Elicia to stay behind us at all times. If Stormy would go on point, I would direct her to move in closer. A brief pause and the three of us started our journey on that November morning.

Elicia and I waded through a sea of vegetation with opaque puff balls on the stem tips, highlighted with yellow leaves interspersed among them. The dawn's early light had cast a filtered glow on everything it touched. It felt like we were walking into a constant state of blurriness. Pale shades of blue, yellow, and creamy whites hovered above the treetops. The entire field was surrounded by bare, brown scraggly trees.

"Stormy's on point!" crackled over the radio, startling me.

"That was fast," I mumbled.

I immediately looked over to my right and could see a flash of orange in the trees. I yelled over to Elicia and motioned for her to follow but remain slightly behind me. As we approached, all I could see was a dark silhouette; beams of light hadn't reached the gray shadows yet. Stormy's head was half-cocked whimsically pointing to the side as she stood staunch. I told Elicia to reposition herself so she could get a good vantage point of what was about to happen.

"Ready?" asked Rich.

I looked over at my daughter and nodded, "Yes."

"Okay, Stormy," said Rich.

With that, the dog moved forward, and a whir of wings suddenly catapulted upwards. The unique sound has been ingrained in my memory for over almost forty years. With one fluid motion, I raised my shotgun and swung and pulled the trigger. The blur fell back towards the earth, landing with a light thud. Stormy instantly retrieved the little quail and brought it back to my hand.

"That's how fast things can happen," I said aloud.

It was odd that it was only one lone quail. I showed Elicia the intricate feather patterns and explained that it was a male, due to the black mask it wore. With her nose to the ground, Stormy made sure there were no more birds, and we moved on. We zigzagged through waist-high weeds. Rich had crossed over to the opposite side of a row of cedars and plum thickets. Stormy was working in the middle, weaving in and out. I couldn't get over how the entire landscape looked with its faded luminescence. It felt like we were walking in an unfinished painting.

A brief time later the radio blared again with news that Stormy was on point. We hurriedly positioned ourselves just ahead of the tree line just in case any quail came through. A faint noise of wings told me a covey had flushed. Shots rang out, followed by boisterous grunts of frustration. Suddenly, a quail zipped by me! I quickly scanned the area and found that Elicia was off to my left, which stopped me from taking a poke at the bird. At Rich's direction, we backtracked to work the majority of the quail that had flown behind us. We anticipated finding singles, but we found nothing. They had vanished like spectral figures.

"I felt strange and somewhat rude as I walked in behind the point and honor – I was a man walking into what was so much like a famous painting that I almost had to laugh. But, if you're lucky, that's what a lot of quail hunting is – a series of lovely paintings that we walk into and out of all day long."

– Gene Hill



We resumed hunting and within minutes found another covey. Stormy held tight several times, but poor shooting negated her efforts. My excuse to myself was the constant haziness that enveloped the morning; it made it difficult to find flying targets. Though my words sound like complaints, on the contrary, the day was beautiful. Walking into the ever-rising sun caused a kaleidoscope of colors that gave life to the drab tones of winter. Sun glares danced around, illuminating the landscape, and flying quail took advantage of it as they dematerialized into thin air, getting lost in the soft yellow rays.

I managed to shoot two more bobs that made the mistake of flying into space not touched by the odd light. As the sun rose higher, the mosaic sieve gave way to clear visions of our surroundings. The swaying field became a russet of colors. Patches of green grass accented the ground beneath towering trees with their outstretched limbs. Subtle clicks could be heard if I ventured close to Elicia. Sometimes she hurriedly moved around in front, behind, and to the side of me. I'm not sure why she chose to put me at the center of attention, but I was overjoyed to be spending time together. It reminded me of an outing where she followed me in the Flint Hills hunting prairie chickens when she was younger. Now that she was a young woman, she'd be graduating from college soon and going on to the next stage of her life. Maybe,

one day she'll look back at those images and remember a day spent with me and the way the light portrayed life.

We looped around and headed back, kicking up a few singles, but again the light became our adversary and played havoc with our eyes. Two hours had passed when the truck came into view. Pictures were taken at the tailgate of the trio of quail shot, and we refueled ourselves with candy bars.

Elicia came over with her camera and quickly went through the myriad of images. They looked great, but the only thing that caught my attention was the soft light that was embedded in almost every picture. There was a sort of peaceful harmony in what she had captured. As we climbed into the truck, my eyes caught a glimpse of the land – it had all changed. The painting had been finished.

There was no more softness and gentleness. It was crisp. Bright. The images that appeared fuzzy and incomplete earlier in the morning were now clear. Hunting quail that morning I realized that light changes constantly as it passes through the heavens and is cast down upon us, and it is what gives life its deepest significance. I turned around and saw my daughter looking at her camera when Elicia said, "Ohhh, the light. I got some really great photos." ➡✈

